days later we stood on the shore of the Maya, shouting for the boatman to take us across the river.

THE BEGINNING OF THE WAR

Soon after our return to Nelkan a steamer arrived from the Lena, the last of the season. We boarded her. The captain invited us to share his meals in the stateroom. One day he casually mentioned at the table that he had heard in Yakutsk that recruits were being conscripted, though he did not know why.

There was no telephone or telegraph connection between Nelkan and Yakutsk, and radio was unknown in Siberia; news traveled slowly. We did not learn about the beginning of the World War until we reached Yakutsk. Even now, after decades of research, historians have found it difficult to retrace the chain of events leading to the conflagration of 1914, but to people in the Siberian wilderness the events of the summer had a nightmarish quality. Newspapers took several weeks to reach Yakutsk and rarely got to the remote villages. All that we knew came from rumors.

In the middle of August, as our steamer passed villages along the Lena, we could observe the people's reactions to the war. Landing places were crowded with men who had been called up. There was a spirit of sullen resignation among them and in the watching crowd as they were loaded onto barges.

The newspapers were full of vituperation against Germany, predicted her immediate defeat, glorified the gallant Allies, and called on the Russian people to rally around the throne. But this propaganda, reminiscent of the days of the Russo-Japanese War, was not very successful. The first month of war proved disastrous for Russia. Two armies were wiped out in the abortive offensive against East Prussia, and among the troops lost in this operation were the best-trained divisions, the Tsar's guard. Those who survived the debacle of Tannenberg believed that their regiments had been led to destruction by treacherous officers—some of them scions of aristocratic families with German names.

The sudden shift from the solitude of the taiga to the turmoil of political events, rumors, and passions was overwhelming. I felt as if our trip to the Dzhugzhur had been an attempt to flee from political realities—another unsuccessful attempt at escape.

The political picture had changed drastically in the nearly five months since I had left Irkutsk. The country was facing new problems; political forces had regrouped. The liberals had joined forces with the